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Answering Your Question: Knowing the Truth

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Answering Your Question: Knowing the Truth

Abstract

"To turn the question of truth towards the person of Christ then helps us answer the question of how we can know that we can know the truth."

Posting about knowing the truth from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/answering-your-question-knowing-the-truth/>

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Answering Your Question: Knowing the Truth

 inallthings.org/answering-your-question-knowing-the-truth/

Neal DeRoo

I teach a senior-level high school Bible class in California, and my colleague and I spend a fair amount of time exploring what “Truth” is, and what it means for us Christians to know Truth. Our question is a bit of a perplexing one, and it essentially boils down to “how can we know that we can know Truth?” and the age-old question of “Is all Truth God’s Truth?” Another way to think of this question is to picture yourself with a non-Christian who believes that we cannot ultimately know Truth. How do we as Christians respond to that in a philosophically sound way?

To engage your hypothetical non-Christian in a way that is both philosophically sound and thoroughly Biblical, I think you have to first clarify what is meant by “truth” before you can begin to defend the claim that we can know it.

As a Christian philosopher, I think that Christian understandings of truth must begin by acknowledging that truth is defined primarily as a person: Jesus Christ is the Truth (and the Way and the Life).¹ This is a significant starting point, because when most people in today’s world think of truth, they immediately think of some idea or thought they have (in their head) and how well it corresponds with how things really are in the world. This notion of “truth” — in philosophy known as the [correspondence theory of truth](#) — cannot help but posit two distinct kinds of occurrences, which then need to “correspond” with each other. Since the [Enlightenment](#), this has been taken to be the correspondence between: a) thoughts, occurring in the mind of an individual person, and b) states of affairs occurring in the world.

Such an understanding of truth is “common sense” where thinking is dominated by a dualist mindset (also dominant since the Enlightenment) that sees a categorical difference between thoughts (as what happens in a person’s mind) and the material world (where things really exist). But, it does not seem to work well in the holistic context of the Bible, where we are not told that Jesus says true things or thinks true thoughts, but that he is, in his very person, the Truth.

To turn the question of truth towards the person of Christ then helps us answer the question of how we can know that we can know the truth. In the correspondence theory of truth, this question is asking how we can be sure that our thoughts can ever correspond perfectly with the way the world is.

In standard correspondence theories, two avenues are usually pursued in response to this question. One is the avenue of certainty — I try to find some mechanism that can guarantee that my thoughts will be adequate to the world they are trying to mirror. Usually, this avenue attempts to find the “right” method that will ensure that its results will yield true statements if properly followed. The scientific method is the most famous of such attempts; logical positivism is another.

Increasingly, more and more philosophers find that this methodological route falls short of certainty. This leaves those committed to the correspondence theory of truth with a second avenue — to claim that certainty is impossible, and all we can do is commit ourselves to a certain picture of the world (which itself cannot be externally verified) and then determine whether our thoughts align with that picture of the world or not. This is known as [fideism](#) in philosophical circles (though it is sometimes also called [relativism](#)² or [perspectivism](#)).

While fideism seems amenable with Christian faith (indeed, fideism is Latin for “faith-ism”), it opens the door to the notion that there is no way for people to discuss their ideas with people who have different fundamental

commitments. This leads to ghettoization; for example, Christian philosophy has little of substance to say to atheistic philosophy, Jewish philosophy, or Buddhist philosophy — or vice versa. The phrase “All truth is God’s truth” is often used to reconnect people from these different intellectual ghettos by suggesting that any truths discovered by those with different commitments can still be used by Christian thinkers, since ultimately, “all truth is God’s truth,” and therefore ought to fit well with fundamental Christian commitments.

Moving away from the correspondence theory of truth and toward the recognition that the Truth is a person helps us also move away from the false binary of certainty or fideism when it comes to “how we can know that we know.” Recovering the personal nature of truth enables us to recover the connection between truth and troth. Merriam-Webster defines troth as “[loyal or pledged faithfulness](#).” To be truthful, something must help us live more faithfully to that which we have ultimately committed our lives to. In this sense, the first “know” in to “know that we know the truth” is seeking not an epistemic or scientific knowledge, but the intimate, personal knowledge of God that Jesus says is equivalent to eternal life (John 17:3). Our knowledge claims are confirmed, not by rational certainty guaranteed by the correct epistemic method, but within the context of a life lived in intimate, personal relationship with God.

As such, seeing Christ as the Truth does not condemn us to the ghettoization of fideism. No matter what (or who) we have given our lives to, we need to live out our lives in the context of the shared world in which Christians not only live alongside people of other faiths, but are also able to learn from them things that help us live more faithfully in our contemporary world. While intimate knowledge of God is the ultimate guarantor of the truth/trothfulness of any thought or action, the factual correctness of certain claims can be rooted in the creation that God established and to which God provides access to all people, regardless of their personal knowledge of him (Matthew 5:45).

This is not to say that being Christian has no bearing on our ability to know the world truthfully — it does. But that truth comes out through the trothfulness by which we live and through which we engage the world around us. This troth is rooted in an intimate relationship with God — or with something else purporting to be God.³

All people can make factually correct statements about certain things in the world, but the truth of those statements will be revealed in what (or who) they draw you into closer, intimate relationship with.

Footnotes

1. For a very philosophically dense exploration of the importance of Jesus’ statement “I am the truth” for Christian philosophy, see the French philosopher Michel Henry’s book *[I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity](#)*. ↩
2. James K.A. Smith explores the relationship between relativism and Christianity in his book *[Who’s Afraid of Relativism?](#)* ↩
3. See Timothy Keller, *[Counterfeit Gods](#)* and Kyle Idleman’s *[Gods at War](#)* for more on how we, as sinful humanity, replace our relationship with God with a relationship with something else, which ends up functioning as an idol in replacement of God. ↩